December 7, 2018

The Anniston Star

A home-owned newspaper Anniston, Alabama - Since 1883

top story

Report: Some of Army's bomb stockpile may need 'indefinite' storage

Workers at the Anniston Munitions Center uncrate Lance missiles at Anniston Army Depot in 2017. (Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star)

Destroying old Army munitions is a cottage industry for Anniston, but according to a report released Thursday, some of those bombs may be on the Army's hands for a long time.

As many as 22,867 tons of explosive devices held at the nation's Army depots may have to be stored "indefinitely" because there's no current environmentally safe way to get rid of them, according to a study released by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

“These munitions would constitute an important ‘capability gap,’ as there would not be a current demilitarization method for these munitions and they would have to be stored indefinitely,” the report says.

The finding was just one of many observations in a lengthy study looking for better ways to destroy aging weapons at seven conventional weapons stockpiles around the country – including Anniston Army Depot.

Congress called for the report in response to public concern about open-air burning and demolition of old bombs and rockets on some bases, which activists say is responsible for releasing lead and other contaminants into the environment. A 2017 report by the news outlet Propublica found open burning or demolition of munitions at 51 sites around the country, including Anniston.

Army officials at the time disputed some of Propublica’s findings. The report listed 209 environmental violations at the Anniston depot; depot officials at the time said only two of those citations were related to open burning.

In the report released Thursday, scientists said cost was the only barrier keeping the Army from switching from burning to other destruction techniques, such as destruction in an enclosed demolition chamber. They also said it would be impossible to do away with old rockets and bombs completely without some explosions or burning out-of-doors.

Their biggest problem: the massive variety and complexity of weapons bought by the Army.

“These are complicated munitions,” said Douglas Medville, one of the authors of the report, in a teleconference Thursday. “These are bombs that have bomblets in them, and those bomblets have shaped charges inside of them.”

The study looked only at the top 400 types of explosives the Army stores, Medville said, though there are “many more.”

“They were never made to be taken apart,” Medville said. “That’s made things interesting for the Army.”

The report devotes only two pages to a prediction by Army officials that as much as 6 percent of the weapons stockpile – including depleted uranium weapons, some smoke-producing munitions and some old rocket motors – could be impossible to destroy safely with any current technology.

The scientists expressed some skepticism about the 6 percent figure, and listed some existing facilities that seem to be destroying weapons of the type on the Army’s list. A spokeswoman for the National Academies referred questions about the number to Army demilitarization program director John McFassel; attempts to reach McFassel on Thursday were unsuccessful.

It’s unclear how many weapons at Anniston Army Depot would fall into the 6 percent category. Depot officials welcomed some of the report’s findings in an emailed statement Thursday, but

didn't answer The Star's questions about amounts of various munitions in stock or the percentage of munitions destroyed by open burning or open demolition.
"The report validated that the Army has made a commitment to implementing alternative technologies, but due to safety concerns, the open burn/open detonation capability will continue to be needed," Joint Munitions Command spokeswoman Justine Barati was quoted as saying in the email.

Still, the community has dealt with "indefinite" storage before. For decades, Anniston was home to one of the nation's largest stockpiles of chemical weapons. Some of those weapons dated back to World War I.The Army burned them in a specially constructed incinerator after the U.S. signed on to a chemical weapons ban; there's little evidence anyone thought about how to destroy them before the ban was signed in the 1990s.

Open burning of munitions on Army bases is on the decline, the scientists concluded. In the 1980s, 80 percent of the Army's old munitions were burned or detonated in the open air, the report said. Now only about 30 percent are. The report also repeatedly cited the use of a closed detonation chamber in Anniston as one of the working alternatives to open-air demolition.

Activist Laura Olah said the report proved the Army's critics had a point.
"The military was telling us for decades that we have to do this one way," said Olah, a member of the Wisconsin-based Cease Fire Campaign, which opposes open burning. "This report says, 'Oh yeah, you can do this other ways.'"

Olah lives near a former Army munitions plant, and says the Army regularly tests her well water for chemicals used at the plant as far back as World War II. Olah said the report shows that the government need only find the will to pay for cleaner ways to get rid of its weapons.

Asked about the weapons that might need "indefinite" storage, Olah said defense officials should think more about the future of the weapons they build.
"We need to design these munitions with the end in mind," she said. "If you know you're going to have to dismantle them, you should build in a way to dismantle them."

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